

A Baltic Chill On Relations

Momentum Is Slower In Superpower Talks

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WASHINGTON, April 7 — During this week's talks between Soviet and American officials, the Kremlin's problems in Lithuania kept intruding on the discussions like an uninvited guest to a dinner party.

For a year United States-Soviet relations seemed to be steadily improving. Initially reluctant Bush Administration officials gradually concluded that they could do business with President Mikhail S. Gorbachev and were generally confident that he was committed to a process of radical change.

But Moscow's hard-line actions in Lithuania, coupled with the sudden toughening of its positions on arms control during last week's talks, has rekindled lingering doubts and even interjected a few new ones among Administration officials as to where Mr. Gorbachev is heading and his prospects for getting there.

'Wake-Up Call'

Speaking of the general situation in Lithuania and its effect in Washington, the Senate Minority Leader, Bob Dole of Kansas, voiced what was on the minds of many when he said on Friday: "Do we really know Gorbachev? How long is he going to be around? Should we just whack away at our defense budget? What are they doing? Where is their peace dividend? I was in Cincinnati last night speaking to a business group on this theme, and you could just see the peoples' heads nodding. People are thinking 'Yeah, this is sort of a wake-up call.'"

For now, Moscow's behavior in Lithuania and during this week's negotiations appears to have had its main effect on the Administration's perceptions of Mr. Gorbachev's chances for success, which were never seen as being high in the first place.

One official said that in the talks with the Soviet Foreign Minister, Eduard A. Shevardnadze, "we were struck by the contrast between his ability to say what he wants to have happen and his inability to explain how they were going to proceed to make it happen."

"I think it left everyone with a much better understanding of how difficult it is going to be for Gorbachev, under the current circumstances, to ride out these changes," the official said.

The Baltic Factor

American officials said they suspect there is a connection between the problems Mr. Gorbachev is confronting in the Baltics and the fact that during this week's discussions the Soviet side tried to backtrack on two arms control concessions made last February.

"One possibility is that with Lithuania going on, Gorbachev was just too focused on other things and the arms-control types around him took advantage of that to reopen some issues," said a senior Administration official. "Another possibility is that he knew what was going on but felt that with everything going on at home he needs the cooperation of the army, so he told them, 'Look, you don't like the deal we're cooking, then you try. See what you come back with.' Or it could actually signify some subtle shift of power back in Moscow, in which case it would be more long-lasting."

Another senior Administration official who took part in the talks said the hardening of the Soviet position on arms control this week has left the Administration in doubt about where the Kremlin stands right now.

'Still See Dramatic Reform'

When Mr. Baker was asked at the closing news conference whether he was still confident that Mr. Gorbachev was committed to a path of reform, he seemed a bit uncomfortable.

"That is what we are told," Mr. Baker said. "You heard the minister himself over the course of three days make those statements to you. We hear the same thing from President Gorbachev. We still see dramatic reform under way in the Soviet Union."

Whether it was related to Mr. Gorbachev's preoccupation with the Baltics or the intrinsically difficult nature of the problem, Administration officials were also struck by how uncertain Soviet officials seemed to be on how to handle the German question. While Mr. Shevardnadze signaled more strongly than ever that the Soviets no longer insist that a unified Germany be neutral, an American negotiator asserted that he was "totally lost" as to what status a unified Germany should have.

"They understand it won't be stable to have a unified Germany floating around in the middle of Europe," said the senior Administration official. "But they start to get real fuzzy when they begin talking about where it would fit."

Not Neutral, but What?

Mr. Shevardnadze rejected Mr. Baker's insistence that a unified Germany be a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Instead, he called for the "transformation of the existing military-political alliances" and the "establishment of non-bloc collective structures."

A senior Administration official said: "When you have all of NATO saying that Germany will have to be in NATO, and you have most of the Warsaw Pact countries saying they would prefer that, and when you have the West Germans saying this is their option, then it seems to me that all the momentum is moving in one direction and the Soviets are sooner or later going to have to accept that."

An official said the notion that NATO is going to disappear to be replaced by some nebulous, 35-nation pan-European security structure is "nonsense," even if that is what some European intellectuals like President Václav Havel of Czechoslovakia have proposed.

"We will create a cover for Gorbachev," the official said, "but we are not junking NATO just because the Soviets don't like it."